

Postmodernism

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Postmodernism represents a paradigm change in intercultural communication studies. It maintains that cultures as objectively bounded and describable domains of behaviour are socially and politically constructed. As an example, the supposedly objective distinction between more individualist and more collectivist national cultures is instead a Western construction of superiority and deficiency respectively. The purpose of intercultural communication research and awareness cannot therefore be an objective focus on cultural difference, but rather a subjective exploration of the the Self and Other politics of how difference is constructed, possibly in relation to prejudice and race, and of how such constructions can therefore be managed.

While postmodernism has been written about by a large number of theorists, I will confine myself in this short article to how it relates to intercultural communication studies. Some of the people I cite may not themselves explicitly subscribe to postmodernism; but I will argue that they contribute to the overall set of principles that represents the paradigm. I will argue that postmodernism is a paradigm in that it 'stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community' (Kuhn 1970: 175).

With regard to intercultural communication, the postmodern constellation of beliefs circulates around the premise that, while cultures may be discernible as domains of behaviour, fixing them as determining specific types of behaviour or binding them as geographical places are acts of social construction, as described by Berger & Luckmann (1979). Social construction is, moreover, set up by ideological positioning by means of discursive processes at all levels of society, even though the people who are involved in this construction may not be aware of it. Postmodernism has provided both an understanding of the nature of intercultural communication and a methodology for how to research it that has underpinned a paradigm change in the field of intercultural communication (MacDonald & O'Regan 2011: 553).

A convenient way to describe some of the detail of the postmodern paradigm is to see what it has to say about the older paradigm that is being overthrown, given that the nature of a particular paradigm may be characterised by how it looks differently at familiar problems (Kuhn, 1970, p. 111). The older, modernist or positivist paradigm sets the nation state, or national culture as the 'default signifier' of who we are (MacDonald & O'Regan 2011:

553). Culture as nation, or at least as a solid place suggests that the people who live in that place share and can be defined by essential characteristics of the culture. This essentialist, physical culture can therefore be described and defined and can predict behaviour.

A prime example of this positivist paradigm is the claim, within a world of separate national 'cultures' that can be each described, some are more individualist and some are in contrast collectivist, with all sorts of detail connected with power, distance and so on. It is then claimed that these characteristics are revealed as the result of objective research, based in interviews and observation of behaviour, employing methods that control variables in such a way that the subjective influence of researchers is neutralised. This is moreover possible because the social world is thought to be segmented in a such a way that the characteristics that are essential to each culture are out there to be found. This positivist image can be traced to the 19th century structural-functional sociology of Emile Durkheim (1982), in which each culture has functional parts that serve the cohesion of the whole. Thus, individualism or collectivism are essential to the nature of the whole and to all the people who reside within it.

The postmodern paradigm, which in contrast could be traced to elements of the understanding of social action in the 19th century sociology of Max Weber (1968), and of ideology in Marxist sociology (Mills 1970), asserts that the positivist claim to objectively described separate cultures is false and naïve. This is not only with regard to the nature of culture and intercultural communication, but also with regard to the social world in general, to academia, to the nature of academic disciplines, and to intercultural communication as a professional-academic practice.

Regarding the example of individualism and collectivism, the postmodern paradigm asserts instead that the categories are a Western construction in which collectivism represents a demonised non-Western cultural deficiency and individualism represents an idealised Western cultural superiority (e.g. Dervin 2011b; Kubota 2001). The postmodern paradigm also refutes that the research methodology that produces these categories is objective because the researcher cannot avoid being ideologically implicated in the research setting. An understanding of the inviability of the perception that the researcher can be an objective observer who is not implicated has developed in ethnographic and qualitative research, with a major watershed moment being Clifford & Marcus (1986). By asking leading questions about cultural difference, the positivist researcher is accused of encouraging respondents to produce easy answers. These answers are 'easy' because the script that underpins them is part of the popular construction of culture with which we are surrounded, through education, the media, and the global Self and Other politics within which we are brought up (Hall 1996). To further support this accusation, a number of critical sociologists (e.g. Beck 2002: 12) argue that social scientists themselves are taken in by a methodological nationalism that derives from 19th century nationalism that constructed the idea of one nation, one language, one culture, that has continued to provide a base set of categories for social science.

The postmodern paradigm therefore accuses the positivist paradigm of producing superficial evidence that fails to get behind socially constructed statements about culture. Anderson (2006), who gives us the notion of national cultures as 'imagined communities', makes the important point that we should be concerned less with how cultures are described and more with 'the style in which they are imagined' (6). Hence, the postmodern paradigm as constructivist and interpretive seeks to reveal the hidden politics of how and why common categories, such as individualism and collectivism, are constructed. This also relates to the notion of stereotypes, which the positivist paradigm perceive to be a starting point for intercultural understanding, the strategy being that working down from over-generalisation, when set against observed behaviour, will lead to an understanding of exceptions, and that this procedure suits the natural manner in which we all make sense of the world. The postmodern argument is instead that we need to interrogate the 'comfortable' ways in which we have got used to looking at the world; and that 'what is interesting instead is to see how stereotypes are created and co-constructed and what they tell us about the people who resort to them' (Dervin 2011a: 187).

The postmodern paradigm also reveals the politics of why the positivist paradigm has been so sustainable. Kuhn (1970) explains how long-standing paradigms can be deeply integrated within the research career structures through which they have been sustained. The replicable development of positivist descriptions and predictions about cultural difference can thus be perceived more as a convenience for building an appearance of career knowledge development than as an alternative form of knowledge. This discounting of old knowledge extends to the use of positivist research in intercultural and cross-cultural awareness training in the business world, where falsely 'objective' national culture constructs have become a saleable product, and in the literature reviews of university assignments, where students find the false yet clear boundaries of positivist constructs easier to understand.

The overall postmodern critique of the positivist search for details of cultural difference on the basis of separate national characteristics is not just that it is an outdated task, but that it represent discourses that construct culture in particular ways that represent ideological positions about how the world is aligned (Hall 1996: 201-202, citing Foucault). Therefore, 'essentialist culture and language' and 'West as steward' discourses, are examples of how the West is characterised as an idealised promoter of globalised education and markets (Holliday 2013: 121). An implication here that might depart from a strictly postmodern view of a world in which all things are constructed, is a view that there are vibrant cultural realities that have been marginalised and diminished as deficient by these dominant discourses and that struggle for recognition and to claim the world (Delanty et al 2008; Hall 1991). There is also a recognition that discourses of cultural difference may be neo-racist, where culture is a euphemism for race. An explicitly postmodern critique of positivism argues that the struggle for the recognition of marginalised cultural realities is inhibited by the subaltern marginalising itself by buying into dominant imaginations of who they are (Kumaravadivelu 2012: 23). Others argue that the subaltern do this to gain social capital in

the face of oppressive cultural labelling.

Whatever position one takes here, what emerges from a postmodern paradigm is a wide ranging discussion of the nature of cultural realities in which, rather than this culture or that culture, the basic units are to do with discourse and ideology and the management of perceptions and identities. The nature of interculturality as a flowing, shifting, uncertain and subjective concept becomes the core of discussion rather than how one essentially defined culture interacts with another. Research is no longer to do with a tight measurement of difference and perceptions as a definable objects, but with an acknowledgedly subjective exploration of how cultural prejudice and Self and Other politics are perceived and managed.

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